

The Twilight of the Western Settler Colonialist Project in Palestine

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"Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it" (Frantz Fanon)[1]

Uncomfortable Truths

In October 2003, late New York University professor and internationally renowned historian Tony Judt wrote an essay in The New York Review of Books (NYRB) entitled "*Israel: The Alternative*" [2]

The reaction to this outstanding article was swift and vicious and, in the case of the American response, verged on hysteria.

In effect, within a week of its publication, the editor of NYRB had received several thousand letters on Judt's essay – more than on any in its history – and the Jewish Professor, who, up to then, had been widely respected for his core commitment to justice and intellectual honesty and loudly acclaimed for his lucid studies of 19th and 20th century social history, in particular his panoramic study[3] of Europe after World War II, became, almost overnight, the object of great furor, defamation and ostracism.

Readers, among whom numerous renowned scholars and heads of Jewish organizations, accused him of belonging to the "Nazi Left", of hating Jews, of denying Israel's right to exist; distinguished professors at American universities canceled their NYRB subscriptions;

Andrea Levin, executive director of the "Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America" accused him of "pandering to genocide" and being "party to preparations for a

final solution”; Alan Dershowitz of Harvard made the analogy with Adolf Hitler’s “one-state solution for all of Europe”, and David Jeffrey Frum, a former speechwriter for President George W. Bush, charged him with advocating “genocidal liberalism”.

Judt’s essay opened with the sentence:

“The Middle East peace process is finished. It did not die: it was killed”, followed by the notion that “The president of the United States of America has been reduced to a ventriloquist’s dummy, pitifully reciting the Israeli cabinet line”.

He went on to contend that Israel “has imported a characteristically late-nineteenth-century separatist project into a world that has moved on, a world of individual rights, open frontiers, and international law. The very idea of a ‘Jewish state’, a state in which Jews and the Jewish religion have exclusive privileges from which non-Jewish citizens are forever excluded is rooted in another time and place. Israel, in short, is an anachronism”; that it

“remains distinctive among democratic states in its resort to ethnoreligious criteria with which to denominate and rank its citizens. It is an oddity among modern nations, not as its more paranoid supporters assert because it is a Jewish state and no one wants the Jews to have a state; but because it is a Jewish state in which one community, Jews, is set above others, in an age when that sort of state has no place”;

and that

“In a world where nations and peoples increasingly intermingle and intermarry at will; where cultural and national impediments to communication have all but collapsed; where more and more of us have multiple elective identities and would feel falsely constrained if we had to answer to just one of them; in such a world Israel is truly an anachronism. And not just an anachronism but a dysfunctional one”.

He also cited the prominent Labor politician Avraham Burg who wrote:

“After two thousand years of struggle for survival, the reality of Israel is a colonial state, run by a corrupt clique which scorns and mocks law and civic morality’[4]. Unless something changes, Judt declared, “Israel in half a decade will be neither Jewish nor democratic”. He then uttered the “anathema” that “the time has come to think the unthinkable”, that is “the bringing to an end of Israel as a Jewish state, and the establishment in its place of a binational state of Israelis and Palestinians”.



In his essay, Prof. Judt explained that, in one vital attribute, Israel is quite different from previous insecure, defensive microstates born of imperial collapse in so far as it is a

democracy, hence its present dilemma due to its occupation of the lands conquered in 1967. Israel, he said, faces the following three “unattractive choices”:

- It can dismantle the Jewish settlements in the Occupied Territories, return to the 1967 state borders within which Jews constitute a clear majority, and thus remain both a Jewish state and a democracy, albeit one with a constitutionally anomalous community of second-class Arab citizens;
- It can continue to occupy “Samaria”, “Judea” and Gaza, whose Arab population added to that of present-day Israel will become the demographic majority, in which case Israel will be either a Jewish state (with an ever-larger majority of unenfranchised non-Jews) or it will be a democracy. But logically it cannot be both;
- It can keep control of the Occupied Territories but get rid of the overwhelming majority of the Arab population, either by forcible expulsion or else by starving them of land and livelihood, leaving them no option but to go into exile. In this way Israel could indeed remain both Jewish and at least formally democratic, but at the cost of becoming the first modern democracy to conduct full-scale ethnic cleansing as a state project, something which would condemn Israel forever to the status of an outlaw state, an international pariah.

As Judt put it, the historian’s task is precisely

“to tell what is almost always an uncomfortable story and explain why the discomfort is part of the truth we need to live well and live properly. A well-organized society is one in which we know the truth about ourselves collectively, not one in which we tell pleasant lies about ourselves”.

Driven by such a principled position, he reacted to the flood of criticism of his contradictors by reiterating his conviction that the solution to the crisis in the Middle East lies in Washington. On this, he said, “there is widespread agreement. For that reason, and because the American response to the Israel-Palestine conflict is shaped in large measure by domestic considerations, my essay was directed in the first instance to an American audience, in an effort to pry open a closed topic.

Many readers have castigated me for heedlessly engaging so volatile a subject without due regard for the sensitivities affected. I respect those feelings. But, like Yael Dayan, I am very worried about the direction in which the American Jewish community is moving; reaction to the essay suggests that this anxiety is well founded”.

He added that

“Actually, Zionism has always been at war and its very identity is a function of conflict, struggle, and mutually exclusive claims on history. From the outset, and long before the Holocaust could be invoked in mitigation, the leaders of the Zionist project regarded the indigenous Arab population of Palestine as their enemy. More than a century ago, the Zionist writer Ahad Ha’Am[5] observed that the settlers ‘treat the Arabs with hostility and cruelty, trespass unjustly on their territories, beat them shamelessly for no sufficient reason, and boast at having done so’. To the extent that little has changed, it is understandable that many readers would dismiss my reflections on a binational state as a crazy fantasy”.

Until his death in 2010, Judt remained faithful to his principles. For him,

“an injustice was committed: How should we acknowledge this and move forward? Indeed, even the very existence of Palestinians was once hotly disputed. In the later 1960s, at a public meeting in London, I was tartly informed by Golda Meir, Israel’s future prime minister, that I could not speak of ‘Palestinians’ since they did not exist”.

In the aftermath of Judt’s death, Mark Levine wrote an article[6] in which he expressed his sorrow for the scope of the loss, not just of the man, but of the type of scholarship, of the way Professor Judt taught those willing to learn about how to approach and utilize history. He pointed out that the historian’s willingness to tell “uncomfortable stories” was not embraced by US government, and informed that few politicians paid much attention to Judt or invited his counsel; no evidence is found of his ever having been called to testify before the US congress, and the White House made no mention of his passing, even though Barack Obama, the US president, has during his tenure invited well-known historians to the White House to help provide him with historical perspective on the numerous crises he faced. Levine concluded his piece by saying that Judt’s writings can inspire a new generation of scholars and activists in other cultures, including in the many societies of the global south:

“It is there, in Latin America, Africa, and the Muslim world, where the legacy of Judt’s call for a critically reflective social democratic political discourse might well be found. If American militarism, European myopia, corporate greed and the militant ideologies of numerous stripes do not doom them first”.

The Settler Colonialist and Ethno-Nationalist Roots of Zionism

An extensive examination of Theodor Herzl’s wittings and movement shows clearly that from its very beginnings to the politics and policies of the state of Israel today, Zionism thought has permanently and resolutely embraced the dominant European discourses of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including anti-Semitism.

In his 1896 *Der Judenstaat* – “state ‘for’, or ‘of’ Jews” would be a literal and more accurate English translation – Theodor Herzl articulated his vision and blueprint for a future “Jewish state” in Palestine by highlighting his scheme as a venture beneficial to both the “current sovereign authority” – then embodied by the Ottoman sultan – and the European colonial powers “under whose protectorate” the new state would come into being and continue to exist: “If His Majesty the Sultan were to give us Palestine” he wrote, “we could offer to resolve Turkey’s finances. For Europe, we would form part of a bulwark against Asia there, we would serve as the advance post of civilization against barbarism”.

As recalled by Nora Scholtes in her thoughtful and thoroughly-researched study submitted for the Degree of Ph.D. in Postcolonial Studies[7], French Marxist historian and sociologist Maxime Rodinson is commonly said to be the first contemporary “Western” scholar to have re-placed Zionism/Israel within its colonial, and more specifically settler colonial, context. Rodinson recognized in Herzl’s propositions a clear manifestation of Zionism as a “colonialist phenomenon”:

“It would have been difficult to place Zionism any more clearly within the framework of European imperialist policies (...) The [Zionist] perspective was inevitably placed within the framework of the European assault on the Ottoman Empire, this ‘sick man’ whose complete dismemberment was postponed by the rivalries of the great powers but who,

in the meantime, was subjected to all kinds of interference, pressures, and threats. An imperialist setting if there ever was one (...) The Europeanism of the Zionists made it possible for them to present their plan as part of the same movement of European expansion that each power was developing on its own behalf”.

Image: Statue of the founder of Zionism Theodor Herzl, unveiled in 2012 at the Mikveh Israel synagogue in Tel Aviv. It is called “Herzl meets Emperor Wilhelm II”



In effect, throughout his writings and speeches, Herzl never missed an opportunity to present the Zionist idea as a quintessentially colonial project, one that would also serve the interests of the Europeans, and more broadly the whole of the “civilized” world. In his *Der Judenstaat* he wrote:

“The world will be liberated by our freedom, enriched by our wealth, magnified by our greatness”, and in a speech he delivered in London in 1891, he declared: “We want to carry culture to the East. And once again, Europe will in turn profit from this work of ours. We will create new trade routes – and none will be more interested in this than England with its Asiatic possessions. The shortest route to India lies through Palestine (...) What could I, poor barbarian from the Continent, tell the inhabitants of England about these things [progress and industry]. They are our superiors in all technical achievements, just as their great politicians were the first to see the necessity for colonial expansion. That is why the flag of Greater-Britain waves over every sea (...) And so I should think that here in England, the Zionist idea, which is a colonial one, should be easily and quickly understood in England, and this in its most modern form”[8].

For Desmond Stewart, there is no doubt that “Herzl’s stencil for obtaining a territory and then clearing it for settlement was cut after the Rhodesian model”[9]. Mark Levene equally argues that Herzl “had an agenda that closely followed and sought to emulate the essential contours of European empire-building in Africa”[10].

It was thus within the context of Western colonialism in Africa that the idea of acquiring a territorial basis for the establishment of a “Jewish entity” was most contemplated, more precisely in the Uasi Ngishu plateau, near Nairobi, Kenya, and not in Uganda as is commonly reported.

Nevertheless, although Herzl did not exclude the option that “The Society”[11] would “take what it will be given under a charter” in what he called a “neutral land” in order to

materialize his colonial-Zionist project – since Argentina was another country envisioned for a possible mass settlement for the Jews – he was convinced that Palestine would be the most powerful asset in attracting a Jewish mass following. As the Jews’ “ever-memorable historic home”, he writes in *Der Judenstaat*, “that name alone would be a tremendously stirring rallying cry for our people”. Furthermore, it is reported that when it was known that Herzl was wavering on the option of Palestine as a Jewish homeland in favor of East Africa or South America, he received a Bible from William Blackstone, an American Christian Zionist, in which every reference to “Israel” or “Zion” had been underlined in red, together with a letter urging him to insist Zionists settle only in Palestine[12].

Ultimately, the East-Africa scheme proposed by the British, which was indeed hotly debated during the 6th Zionist Congress held in Basel on 23 August 1903, was rejected, both because of a lack of support by the critical mass of Russian Jews and because the British government faced a strong local opposition on the part of British settlers in its African territories to the idea of a Jewish colony in the area.

And so, by the time of Herzl’s death the following year, the East-Africa and Argentina options had all but vanished from the agenda of the Zionist leadership. In a 1914 article of German newspaper *Die Welt*, a special issue on the tenth anniversary of Herzl’s death, Herzl’s East-Africa proposal is described by Bernstein as a “historical derailment”, a desperate and well-intentioned, but ultimately misguided attempt at providing emergency help to Eastern Europe’s persecuted Jews. Herzl, he indicated, “grasped the Uganda-straw immediately after the pogrom in Kishinev (...) He impatiently searched for a quick rescue (...) even if only in the form of a ‘night shelter’. It was the greatest sacrifice that Herzl has made for his people. He sacrificed, even if only for a moment, his life’s ideal”[13].

From that point onwards, the new leadership concentrated all its efforts on the implementation of the most preferred solution, that is the creation of a purely Jewish state in Palestine, mainly by way of ethnic cleansing. The terminology of “ethnic cleansing” only in recent times entered popular vocabulary. The concept used by Zionist thinkers was “transfer”, and Herzl’s true plans with regard to Palestine’s non-Jewish population are well-documented in his diary, where as early as 1895 he put forward this idea, writing: “We shall try to spirit the penniless population across the border by procuring employment for it in the transit countries, while denying it any employment in our own country”.

The same can be said about David Ben-Gurion, the primary national founder of the State of Israel as well as its first prime minister. Indeed, in a letter[14] dated 5 October 1937 he sent to his son Amos – who appeared to be critical of his father’s decision to support a partition plan put forward by the Peel Commission – Ben-Gurion describes how he sees partition of Palestine and expulsion of Palestinians fitting into the Zionist movement’s long term goals:

“My assumption (which is why I am a fervent proponent of a state, even though it is now linked to partition) is that a Jewish state on only part of the land is not the end but the beginning (...) The establishment of a state, even if only on a portion of the land, is the maximal reinforcement of our strength at the present time and a powerful boost to our historical endeavors to liberate the entire country (...) We shall organize an advanced defense force – a superior army which I have no doubt will be one of the best armies in the world. At that point I am confident that we would not fail in settling in the remaining parts of the country, through agreement and understanding with our Arab neighbors, or through some other means (...) We must expel Arabs and take their place

(...) But if we are compelled to use force (...) in order to guarantee our right to settle there, our force will enable us to do so (...) Because of all the above, I feel no conflict between my mind and emotions. Both declare to me: A Jewish state must be established immediately, even if it is only in part of the country. The rest will follow in the course of time. A Jewish state will come”.

Maxime Rodinson asserts that the root cause of all of Zionism’s future failings is consubstantial with its very colonial founding vision:

“Once the premises were laid down, the inexorable logic of history determined the consequences. Wanting to create a purely Jewish, or predominantly Jewish, state in an Arab Palestine in the twentieth century could not help but lead to a colonial-type situation and to the development (completely normal, sociologically speaking) of a racist state of mind, and in the final analysis to a military confrontation between the two ethnic groups”. Gabriel Piterberg agrees with Rodinson’s early analysis: “From the moment Zionism’s goal became the resettlement of European Jews in a land controlled by a colonial European power, in order to create a sovereign political entity, it could no longer be understood just as a central or east European nationalism; it was also, inevitably, a white-settler colonialism”[15].

The unavoidable consequence of such a vision is what Ahad Ha’am warned against back in 1891 already:

“if the time comes when the life of our people in Eretz Israel develops to the point of encroaching upon the native population, they will not easily yield their place”[16]. A decade before Ha’am made his prescient comment, Palestine’s population was some 460,000. Of these, around 400,000 were Muslim Arabs; about 40,000 were Christian, mostly Greek Orthodox; and the remainder, Jews.

How challenging these figures are to the falsehood of one of Zionism’s most cherished founding myths – that of “a land without people for a people without land” – and how shockingly ill-intentioned was Herzl’s omission of *any* reference to “Arabs” or “Palestinians” in his 30,000-word pamphlet!

Assuredly, Herzl’s dream of a national home for the Jews that would end both their own age-old insecurity within the diaspora and Gentiles’ anti-Semitism has inexorably transformed into a nightmare both for Jews and Palestinians and for the world which is still held hostage to their struggle, with no apparent solution in a completely transformed and blood-soaked “Holy Land”.

Nightmare is precisely the key word in the title of the brilliant book[17] Peter Rodgers, a former Australian journalist and ambassador to Israel, devoted to the tragic drama caused by the pursuit of Herzl’s dream by his Zionist followers, to the present day.

Whatever their historical or emotional attachment to the land they came to rule, Rodgers asserts, the Jews of Israel had supplanted another people, a people who would not forget. The making of one nationalist dream has indeed involved the unmaking of another. But for how long and for what price?

The Aussie ambassador’s very well-researched study tells a story of sorrow and anger in a balanced manner – insofar as this is possible – which, obviously entails the risk of drawing

fire from both Jews and Palestinians, but this, he says, is sadly part of the twisted logic of the conflict. The story told shows how little the dynamics of the conflict between Jew and Palestinian have changed; how eerily reminiscent today's antagonisms and falsehoods are of yesteryear's; how "modern" leadership is anything but; and how much today's self-righteous intransigence owes to what went before. Furthermore, it poses the vital question: "have the nationalist dreams of both peoples been doomed by the determined refusal of Jew and Palestinian to contemplate what life must be like for the other?"

To epitomize the opposing views of the protagonists, Rodgers, in his concluding remarks, quotes Yasser Arafat as saying that "the womb of the Arab woman" is one of the Palestinians' most potent weapons, and Shimon Peres, who, writing of a deepening chasm between Israelis and Palestinians, commented typically: "We are sorry but not desperate". Rodgers reacted to these last words by saying: "He might perhaps have added wisely, not yet".

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Notes

[1] Frantz Fanon, "The Wretched of the Earth" (Original French version: "Les Damnés de la Terre"), François Maspero, 1961. To read the book: <https://archive.org/details/thewretchedoftheearth/The%20wretched%20of%20the%20earth%20%20%20/>

[2] To read the full essay: <https://archive.globalpolicy.org/security/issues/israel-palestine/2003/1025alternative.htm>

[3] Tony Judt, "Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945", Penguin Press, London, 2005.

[4] Avraham Burg is a former head of the Jewish Agency and Speaker of the Knesset, Israel's Parliament, between 1999 and 2003. His essay first appeared in the Israeli daily Yediot Aharonot; it has been widely republished, notably in the Forward of 29 August: "A Failed Israeli Society Collapses While Its Leaders Remain Silent" (<https://forward.com/news/7994/a-failed-israeli-society-collapses-while-its-leade/>), the London Guardian of 15 September 2003: "The end of Zionism" (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/sep/15/comment>), and in French newspaper Le Monde of 11 September 2003: "La révolution sioniste est morte" (<https://www.mafhoum.com/press5/159C73.htm>).

[5] Ahad Ha'am, "Emet M'Eretz Yisrael" (Truth from Eretz Israel), originally published in 1891 in the Hebrew daily newspaper Hamelitz (St. Petersburg), and translated by A. Dowty, Israel Studies, 2000.

[6] Mark Levine, "Tony Judt: An intellectual hero", Aljazeera.com, 14 August 2010.

[7] Nora Scholtes, "Bulwark Against Asia: Zionist Exclusivism and Palestinian Responses", University of Kent School of English, 2015.

[8] Quoted in Nora Scholtes, Op cit.

[9] Desmond Stewart, "Herzl: Artist and Politician", Hamish Hamilton, London, 1974.

[10] Mark Levene, "Herzl, the Scramble, and a Meeting That Never Happened: Revisiting the Notion of an African Zion", in: Bar-Yosef, E., Valman, N. (eds) "'The Jew' in Late-Victorian and Edwardian Culture: Between the East End and East Africa", Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2009.

[11] In Der Judenstaat Herzl writes: "The plan, simple in design, but complicated in execution, will be carried out by two agencies: The Society of Jews and the Jewish Company. The Society of Jews will do the preparatory work in the domains of science and politics, which the Jewish Company will afterwards apply practically. The Jewish Company will be the liquidating agent of the business interests of departing Jews, and will organize commerce and trade in the new country".

[12] Donald Wagner, "Dying in the Land of Promise", Melisende, London, 2000.

[13] Bernstein, S., "Theodor Herzl im Lichte des Ostjudentums" (Theodor Herzl in the Light of Eastern Jewry), Die Welt, 3 July 1914: <https://sammlungen.ub.uni-frankfurt.de/cm/periodical/pageview/3355506>, cited by Nora Scholtes, op cit.

[14] This letter was first referred to by Ilan Pappé in his article entitled "The 1948 Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine", Journal of Palestine Studies, issue 141, Fall 2006. It was later translated from Hebrew into English by the Institute of Palestine Studies, Beirut, Lebanon. To read the full translated letter: <https://www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org/2013/04/06/the-ben-gurion-letter/>

[15] Gabriel Piterberg, "Settlers and their States", New Left Review, No. 62, March-April 2010: <https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii62/articles/gabriel-piterberg-settlers-and-their-states>

[16] Ahad Ha'am, "Truth from Eretz Israel", op cit.

[17] Peter Rodgers, "Herzl's Nightmare: One Land, Two Peoples", Constable, London, 2005.

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